DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 390 042 CS 215 113

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TITLE Preparing Students To Write in the Real World.
PUB DATE Jul 95
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition (14th, University Park, PA, July 12-15, 1995).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Audience Awareness; Editing; Essay Tests; *Portfolio Assessment; Portfolios (Background Materials); *Revision (Written Composition); Self Evaluation (Individuals); Student Educational Objectives; Student Needs; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

While the process of getting together a writing portfolio might help some students to understand how one is assembled, not all, or even most, graduates will have need to go through the process again in their lives. All the more reason, some would say, for them to do it now, but there are any number of reasons why this assumption should be questioned. First, the portfolio construct seems to value creative writing and personal narration over textual analysis, argument, synthesis, and other more traditional modes of discourse. Realistically, in their post-graduate lives, students will need to produce clear writing quickly. In their careers, they will need to draft memos, prepare briefs, and send e-mail on a daily basis. Do educators seriously expect students to brainstorm, freewrite, take a memo through drafts, perhaps have a colleague offer input before revision? Barbara Fassler Walvoord suggests that part of the writing curriculum should help students to write and revise quickly in the classroom. If the impromptu essay test is restrictive, expecting the student to write on someone else's topic under time pressure, then a writing course should help students to write under such conditions since such conditions will be the conditions through much of their professional lives. (TB)

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ED 390 042

Preparing Students to Write in the Real World

I'd like to start by acknowledging my debt to a former student, James Johnson. Guiding his comp-rhet independent study this past spring led to the ideas that developed into this paper. We had numerous discussions and a few disagreements about what best serves the interests of writing students. One area we did agree on was portfolios. We both see this latest trend in the teaching of writing as an artificial construct that has no real relation to the kinds of writing students will do in other college courses or post-graduation.

I teach on a branch campus of Miami University that has an open admission policy, optional assessment testing, and no mandatory placement whatsoever. Most of my students are the first in their families to go to college; many are non-traditional students who have been out of school for some time; several have earned GEDs. There is a distinct difference between Hamilton's students and those I've taught on Miami's main campus in Oxford, a difference that comes from economic backgrounds, which affect educational backgrounds. The popular press will tell you that the future will bring more branch-campus type students to our universities. My own experience teaching at four different universities over the past twelve years tells me this as well. Are such students best served by a portfolio-driven classroom?

While the process of gathering a portfolio might help some students understand how a professional portfolio is assembled, not all graduates will need a professional portfolio. And except

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for those who specifically enter a writing career, most former students will not have time or reason to produce, revise, and select among a diverse body of their own work, or to reflect upon their writing process. All the more reason for them to do it now, portfolio advocates would say. I'm not against having students think about their writing process, but this does not necessarily have to be done in a reflective letter affixed to their favorite creations. Students can write about their writing in journal entries or more formal essays, if that mode is desired. I suppose what is at the heart of my discontent with portfolios is the kinds of writing and approaches to producing it they encourage.

Portfolio contents will, of course, vary from institution to institution, course to course, instructor to instructor, and student to student. The portfolio construct, however, seems to value (and I stress "value" here, not "require") creative writing and personal narration more than textual analysis, argument, synthesis, and other more traditional modes of discourse. If a reflective letter is required, students are generally asked to discuss why they chose to include the pieces they did and to comment on their writing process for these pieces. This kind of portfolio is, I argue, too narrow in scope and too focused on those rhetorical modes that will be of little practical use to students after they complete the composition course. I am not out to thwart creativity or silence students' personal voices, but the fact is that one fourteen week writing course may be all these students ever get, and to allow them to pass through such a

course without preparing them to write for situations they will later encounter is doing them a disservice.

I realize that at this point I may be sounding like some old-fashioned, grammar-hound of a composition teacher--perhaps like one you once had--a spectre rising before you crying, "Cause and effect! Comparison and contrast! Division and classification!" Many such teachers turn students off of writing and make them freeze up whenever they face blank paper with a tightly clenched pencil. Let me say here that I abhor the five paragraph essay, that I encourage students to develop their own voices and to experiment with tone, and that I never assign specific topics but allow students to develop their own within whatever area we are studying. The composition field has spent years trying to get students to relax and feel comfortable with the idea of writing. I am all for this. And there is no reason that practical, useful writing cannot be done with students at ease. Student confidence, a sense of ownership of their writing, visible signs of student productivity, all claims the portfolio makes, can be achieved without the portfolio construct and, better yet, they can be achieved along with a proficiency in the kinds of writing students will actually be doing the rest of their careers.

Realistically, in their post-graduate lives students will need to produce clear writing quickly (and, again realistically, many of them already practice this as students, writing that paper the night before it's due). In their careers they will need

to draft memos, prepare briefs and send e-mail on a daily basis. Such writing permits minimal or no time for backing off, rethinking, and rewriting. Do we seriously expect students to brainstorm, freewrite, and take a memo through several drafts, perhaps having a colleague offer input before revision? Of course not--such elaborate processes are not appropriate for the writing task. The emphasis of process over product gained a stronghold in composition pedagogy partly, I believe, because that is how good academic writing and good fiction is produced. But the majority of our students won't become professors or authors. I'm afraid that our own concerns as academic writers have short-sighted us as to what our students need to learn about writing: how to think critically, even creatively, under pressure and how to write well under time constraints. These are skills we can teach by having students practice quick revision methods, in-class writing, writing under the pressure of short deadlines, and writing within restrictive guidelines.

Barbara Fassler Walvoord's book Helping Students Write Well (NY: MLA, 1986) offers several methods by which students can increase their self-editing pace in a variety of writing tasks. (1) Instructors can administer a diagnostic exercise early in the course by asking students to give high polish to a short piece of their writing. Those students in need can receive extra instruction and practice so that by the end of the semester they are more ready to produce the required polish. (2) In the beginning of a semester, instructors can allow students a longer

time for in-class essay writing and then gradually increase the time pressure over the course of the semester. (3) Initially, instructors can have students take their first drafts home for revision; next, revisions can be done in class; ultimately, students will revise and edit as they write in class. (4) Instructors can incorporate situational variety in the classroom. As Walvoord puts it, "To produce writing that is sent to its readers in various states of polish is common in the career world: an in-house memo to one's peers will not be worked over with the same intensity as a letter to a prospective customer or a formal proposal to the board. Sound pedagogy may reflect such situational variety in the classroom" (17). Instructors should clarify the reasons for expectations about different levels of polish, being sure, as Walvoord notes, to "Emphasize the career damage that may be done when a person sends an insufficiently polished piece of writing in a situation where high polish is expected" (17).

I am not the only one skeptical about the claims of portfolios and advocating such alternative approaches to teaching writing. In his February 1995 article "Apologia for the Timed Impromptu," which appeared in College Composition and Communication, Ed White asserts that "the time has come for portfolio advocates . . . to recognize the important role essay testing has played in the past--and can still play--and stop attacking essay testing as an unmitigated evil in order to promote portfolios, which can stand very well on their own" (31).

I agree with White when he sees this newest system of writing assessment "demand[ing] denunciation as well as renunciation of the old one" (31). As White puts it, the attack on essay testing comes "in an unseemly and often uncritical eagerness to promote portfolios as the new panacea for writing assessment" (31). White warns us that "We need to be careful about defining 'the writing process' as if there were only one or two right ways to proceed, and we need to remember that revision sometimes makes writing worse--particularly personal experience writing, . . . as students fix up their drafts to meet what they take to be teacher expectations" (35).

White cites a problem of the impromptu essay test (and all tests) as "restrict[ing] the world of the student, who must write under time pressure to someone else's topic and scoring criteria" (36). But doesn't his criticism point out the merit of including such writing as at least <u>one</u> aspect of the first year composition course? Students <u>will</u> have to take tests in college; students <u>will</u> have to write under time constraints; students <u>will</u> have to write on someone else's topic and meet someone else's scoring criteria. Shouldn't they be taught techniques for successfully producing such writing? I personally have not yet reinstated the timed impromptu essay in my classroom, although I am considering it. What I do have students do--as I write along with them--is freewrite on a specific question before discussion or write their own questions and comments for discussion; develop a working draft for an essay; write up notes of small group discussions.

These are but a few ways to acclimate students to writing to a task within a time constraint.

Perhaps the most apt way to show that portfolios are at best an artificial construct would be to address the benefits to the student that portfolio advocates claim. I've chosen these items from Robert Tierney, Mark Carter, and Laura Desai's book Portfolio Assessment in the Reading-Writing Classroom (Christopher-Gordon, 1991).

Portfolios "make a collection of meaningful work" (59). Quite seriously, what is a portfolio but that old staple of the classroom, a folder, renamed? It is a repository for student work. I believe undue emphasis is placed on the student "selection" process--students are going to select the pieces that received most favorable teacher feedback; indeed, their reflective cover letters often mention the positive response of readers to the pieces they've included. Which brings me to the next claim for portfolios: portfolios allow students to "reflect on their strengths and needs" (59). The majority of reflective letters I've read address these strengths and needs only in the most superficial way--"I really need to work on my spelling"; "I've always been poetic in my word choice"; "I've always liked/disliked writing" and "I'm good/bad at it." Rarely does the student writer probe deeply and articulately into their writing process and style.

Portfolios help students "set personal goals" (59). Those students who wish to have a wider selection of their own writing

from which to choose at semester's end will set a high goal and produce more writing and revise more; those students who have low aspirations will produce the minimum number of pieces the portfolio requires and revise little. Personal goals can be set by students in nearly any type of classroom--I see no restrictions being placed on students in a non-portfolio classroom if they are required to turn in seven essays over the course of the semester. A student can set high personal goals and write more than seven or spend a great amount of time producing and revising those seven essays. Personal goals are just that--personal. An encouraging environment can be offered by any teacher who so chooses, using a variety of pedagogies.

Portfolios will help students "see their own progress over time," "look at a variety of work," and "see effort put forth" (59). Again we come to the folder-renamed issue: if students save their drafts over the course of the semester, they will have a growing collection of their own work, and they can read teacher comments to see their progress in strengthening their writing. Nothing prohibits them from looking at all this writing at the end of the semester, although I suppose the portfolio construct forces them to do it when they might not bother--because they don't see a benefit to it; they know if their grades went up with each successive assignment. And we can't ignore this grade thing no matter how much we might like to. The trick is to get students to value developing and strengthening their own writing in and of itself. I see how a collection of one's work in sort of a display

could encourage this. But there are other ways to do this, such as modelling for students by sharing your own writing problems and answers, failures and successes. I bring in rejection letters for my scholarly work, discussing how I hadn't been able to properly consider audience; I share conditional acceptance letters that ask for revisions and then explain what I plan to do to meet the reader's requirements. Most students tell me (in their journal entries) that they appreciate hearing about my problems as a writer seeking publication. We are always asking our students to take risks--we should risk showing the ups and downs of our own writing processes. Students will learn from it.

Portfolios allow students to "think about ideas presented in their work" (59). I would have to say this ought to be a goal of every good teacher in every subject! Certainly the discussion-method classroom, peer review, and teacher conferences provide a variety of contexts for students to think about the ideas they present in their writing.

Portfolios allow students to "have a clear understanding of their versatility as a reader and a writer" (59). In every writing and literature course I've ever taught students have practiced a variety of rhetorical modes, formats, and approaches to secondary texts. I'd like to think most writing teachers structure their courses to allow students such experience. But if an instructor doesn't vary writing assignments already, the portfolio isn't likely to make her change.

Portfolios will allow students to "feel ownership for their

work" and "feel that their work has personal relevance" (59). Again, I don't feel that this is something exclusive to the portfolio construct, nor do I think it will automatically come with the implementation of portfolios. So much here depends on teacher attitude toward student writers, and attitudes can cross pedagogical boundaries so that we could have an unsupportive teacher demanding the use of portfolios or an encouraging teacher working without them. I object to the feel-good terminology surrounding portfolios because I think it is dangerous: portfolios are "vehicles" that "empower" students and allow us to "celebrate" them. How empowered will a former student feel when their written report to a supervisor isn't celebrated as a vehicle of self-expression but judged as a final product? We must not be so afraid of hurting students' sense of self that we indiscriminately praise their work. We must not "celebrate" them in a way that gives them a false sense of advantage. True power comes with a proficiency in the skills that are valued by a larger society than our academic one. I am not always sure I agree with what our larger society values, and I strive to make students aware of value conflicts, but I also feel I'd be doing my students a disservice if I didn't prepare them with the writing skills that our society requires for success (or even recognition).

Vivienne Hayward, in her essay "Assessing Students' Writing," which appears in the book Literacy Evaluation: Issues and Practicalities (Ed. Chrystine Bouffler, Portsmouth:

Heinemann, 1992), argues that "students' growth as autonomous writers and learners is stultified because they have not been given the criteria by which writing is valued in our society" (63). Students can only take responsibility for their own education and participate in the decision-making process, Hayward asserts, "if they have an information base from which to work" (63). Consideration of this issue is missing from much of the talk about portfolios. Students are coming woefully equipped from many of our high schools and I see one of the missions of first year composition as helping students establish a solid base of writing and critical reading skills. In the introduction to Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition (NCTE, 1980) Timothy Donovan and Ben McClelland put forth criteria for finding a suitable approach to teaching writing: does the pedagogy "adequately account for the writing processes of students and provide appropriate methods for improving writing ability?" Does the pedagogy "provide a more adequate account and methodology than other alternatives?" (xii). I am not convinced that portfolios do provide a more adequate methodology. In surveying other pedagogical techniques such as the aforementioned in-class writing, in-class revision, and situational variety, to name but a few, I see everything that the portfolio offers--and more. And it is the more on which I focus in my decision not to implement portfolios in my classroom.

As with any other methodology, portfolio pedagogy is developed and implemented by individual instructors. Any writing

pedagogy driven by the goal of celebrating students rather than honing their skills needs close assessment, and it appears to me that portfolio use, more readily than other methodologies, offers the chance for instructors to lose sight of their many tasks, of which the building of student self-esteem is only one.

One graduate student at Miami's Hamilton campus explained in a locally published essay how she built writer "pride and pleasure" in remedial writing courses with what she terms a "motivational portfolio" (Linda Sheils, "Portfolios in English 001," Center News 19.2 [Winter 1992]: 6). One of her primary goals in the course was to "achiev[e] a sense of positive self-esteem for each student," a goal she met by using portfolios "to motivate instead of assess" (8). To eliminate grade anxiety in the second half of the semester she "guarant[eed] a passing mark to every student who successfully completed the course requirements" of attending all classes, bringing "some new writing each time," producing writing "that needed to be only correct enough to read," and revising all pieces written thus far--and only those written thus far: "new work need not be revised," she wrote, "the goal now was to fatten the folders" (8). While I hope this course design is an extreme instance, it is an example of how the portfolio can be dangerously misused. Many remedial students' self-worth must be built before the motivation to succeed will occur, but guaranteed passing grades and writing just to "fatten the folders" are false indicators to students and make portfolios useless.

I would urge all of us to scrutinize any methodology we use in the writing classroom. Do we know why we are implementing it? What are our goals for the course? What do we want our students to achieve? Will this pedagogy best meet them? I agree with the claims of portfolio advocates that students should be invested in their writing, that they should practice a variety of writing skills, and that they should feel pride in writing that is well done. But portfolios are not the only means to this end, and I remain unconvinced that they are the best.